

*"Joseph Cornell worked in awe of the power of cinema to show what can and what cannot be shown."*  
- P. Adams Sitney, *The Cinematic Gaze of Joseph Cornell*

Magic works best when it is subtle. Walk into the "Dada/Surrealism" section of the Art Institute, pass by the Duchamps and the Dalis, and you just might miss the little enigmatic light-up dioramas, adorned with Hollywood starlets poised like Victorian angels inside, tucked away in a side room. It's worth noting the way that these beautiful objects by Cornell blend so seamlessly into the array of "mighty" works by more well-known artists, that they might easily be overlooked. The same goes for his films.

The dioramas possess in abundance what all great works of art should have (in my humble opinion): mystery. But their size and very nature might appeal to the eyes of a child more readily than the average adult art-lover: much like peering into the knothole of a tree, Cornell's works seem directed toward the curiosity and love of ephemera with which children examine the world. With his relatively intentional obscurity, Cornell would seem to be comfortable being overlooked by the autograph hounds of the art world, making him all the more available to the selective admirer.

For much of his life, he was reticent to screen his own films. Probably due in part to the fact that, at the screening of his very first, the seminal patchwork appropriation film *Rose Hobart*, Salvador Dali went apeshit (as only a Surrealist could), claiming that Cornell had stolen his own ideas before he could even express them! Cornell, who was not only a great admirer of Dali and Bunuel's *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Age d'Or* but considered by many to be the first and only "American Surrealist", was deeply disturbed by Dali's irrational outburst and used it as an excuse for many years to avoid showing the film.

*Rose Hobart* (c. 1936 – "circa", as Cornell notoriously avoided placing exact dates on his films) was the first film to be entirely constructed out of "found footage" – in this case, the droll 1931 jungle adventure film *East of Borneo*, starring the lovely Rose Hobart in a tragic waste of her skill and beauty. Yet her performance did not go unnoticed by Cornell, who acquired the film (like many of the other incredibly old and rare films which became the raw materials for most of his films) at an old NYC warehouse, which sold films *by the pound* to Depression-era "panners" who were eager to extract the silver-nitrate. In Cornell's "reconstruction" (note: approximately 30 years before Bruce Conner and others would see fit to do the same), *Rose Hobart* is not only the star but the *holy relic* of the film: removing all linear narrative, the film revels in the small wonders of the lovely Miss Hobart's expressions, her anxieties and her wonderment at the strange world that Cornell has constructed for her. The film is simultaneously hilarious and transcendent, both strange and wonderful, like a crop circle or a meticulously hand-painted egg.

As interested in the process of projection as he was in the film itself, Cornell spiced up his surrealist collage film with the musical accompaniment of a repetitive rhumba record, played alongside the projector, all the while projecting the black-and-white images through a piece of brilliant blue glass. The effect is stunning, like being on the inside of one of his Hollywood-starlet dioramas. Placed critically alongside *Un Chien Andalou* as perhaps the most fully-realized Surrealist film, *Rose Hobart* is by far the best-known work of Joseph Cornell, as well as the most readily available (check it out in the DVD box set of *Treasures from American Film Archives*, available at your local college library).

But Cornell was uncomfortable with the Surrealist label to which his work became attached. He disliked (what he saw as) the antagonistic eroticism and penchant for violence in the Surrealists, but was a great admirer of Duchamp, whose work he felt bore out the "healthier possibilities" of the movement. While no prude, Cornell was more interested in the transcendence of the *Unheimlich* (the Uncanny) along with the "evanescent fragments" of silent film (and its starlets, upon whom he reaped much praise), which he melded together in his films in an effort to seize upon the very subconscious territory of the human psych, which the Surrealists were so fond of prodding into action. For Cornell, only the most fragile and most fleeting examples of beauty, implicit in everyday reality, were worthy of artistic labor. Later on, when he worked with not only old and found but also color film, the ethos of silent film continued to

dominate his work with its sublime simplicity of imagery sans sound: hot iron magma, a cloud behind a statue's wing, a kid on a horse, and birds, lots and lots of birds.

Perhaps the most important legacy of Joseph Cornell is in his profound influence on the American avant-garde: in 1957, he gave Stan Brakhage one of his first real \*experimental\* film jobs, hiring him to shoot a film on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue El in NYC, which was about to be demolished. Brakhage shot a few more films for Cornell, but only as a "medium": Cornell directed every shot, every pan and every angle. As Sitney has remarked, these "protagonist-less" films proved to have a great impact on Brakhage's work. Sitney also worked with the phenomenal experimental animator Larry Jordan, who edited Cornell's later collage pieces but only according to his careful instructions. Jordan also helped to bring Cornell's work out of obscurity in the mid-60's and Cornell himself back into a productive mode with his filmmaking. During the course of his life, Cornell only made some 25-odd films, most of which now reside at the Anthology Film Archives in NYC.

(These notes would not have been possible without the help of P. Adams Sitney's essay, "The Cinematic Gaze of Joseph Cornell", from the MoMA book Joseph Cornell. Additionally, info was gathered from Utopia Parkway by Deborah Solomon, Joseph Cornell's Theater of the Mind edited by Mary Ann Caws, and A Joseph Cornell Album edited by Dore Ashton.)